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CHAPTER XI

BAJRAKTARS

It is an Albanian tradition that when the Turks began to raise Albanian levies for their army they chose specially brave tribesmen to lead the levies and called them by the Turkish name of *deli*, meaning 'madman' or 'desperado'. At a later date they called them *spahis* (cavalrymen), and at a still later date *bajraktars* (standard-bearers), from the Turk *bajrak*, standard. So the word bajraktar conveys the business of the man so-called, and the origin of his title. He was the military leader of his tribe and owed his appointment to the Turks, not to his fellow-Albanians.

Neither delis nor spahis seem to have been blood ancestors of the bajraktars. Each tribe knows how its first bajraktar won his flag but never says that he was either a deli or a spahi. In the folk-tales which purport to recount their deeds, the spahis figure not as heroes but as ordinary cavalrymen of the type we still find in Algeria. Certain families, notably in Lumë and Yugoslav Losovë, are surnamed Spahi. These claim descent not from medieval bravos but from relatively modern cavalrymen, and they are not bajraktars. The memory of the delis and their deeds survives only in folk-tales and an occasional personal name. The bajraktar of Hot at the beginning of the century was Deli Metë Çuni. In the folk-tales the delis, more fortunate than the spahis, preserve their reputation as doughty fighters.

Tribal traditions agree that most *bajraks* were bestowed on the original holder like a Victoria Cross, for valour in battle. The combats were generally against the Serbs and Montenegrins, natural enemies of the Albanians as they were their nearest neighbours, and had not ceased ever since they appeared in the Balkans to steal ancient Albanian territory. Some bajraks are said to have been gained hundreds of years ago, and others only a few generations since. The historical details in the traditions are generally meagre and the chronology vague, but these defects make on the whole for greater credibility, assuring us that no lively imagination has been at work. To minds running as Albanian